

Myth, Fantasy and Reality: A Magical Realist Study of Nadeem Aslam’s “Maps for Lost Lovers”

Hiba Zaheer¹, Saba Idris², Memoona Idris³ and Amina Ishaq⁴

Abstract

This study delves into the alluring world of magical realism in Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004) where the literary setting develops as a rich tapestry of natural attraction, socio-cultural intricacies, and eternal myths. In this comprehensive inquiry, Aslam’s narrative skill reveals the delicate interplay between magical realism and the unfathomable depths of character psychology through miraculous occurrences and happenings that mold their collective memory. The representation of nature transforms from an ordinary background to a dynamic force that mirrors individuals’ inner landscapes. From the meandering river to the pristine stars and moon, each celestial element weaves a narrative of human experience and echoes larger thematic currents and associates their past and present with remarkable details while it transforms the actual world into magical. This research sheds light on the transformative potential of magical realism and how Aslam masterfully navigates universal societal challenges by intertwining myths, legends and poetry. The narrative analysis is enriched by superstitious events and by drawing parallel to timeless tales of Heer Ranjha and Sassi Punnu. This analysis also resonates the voice of British-Pakistani community that unravels the multifaceted nature of culture and society depicted in the novel.

Keywords: Magical realism, socio-cultural intricacies, eternal myths, miraculous occurrences, paralleling timeless tales, transformative potential

Introduction

This research aims to investigate the interplay of myth, fantasy, and reality in *Maps for Lost Lovers* analyzing how Aslam employs elements of magical realism

¹ Department of English, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore – Pakistan

² Govt. Graduate Islamia College, Copper Road, Lahore – Pakistan

³ COMSATS University Islamabad, Lahore Campus, Lahore – Pakistan

⁴ Department of English, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore – Pakistan

to imbue the narrative with layers of meaning, symbolism, and allegory. By examining the fusion of the fantastical with the everyday and through a close reading of key passages and an exploration of critical perspectives, this study seeks to unravel the thematic significance of magical realism in Aslam's work. And also sheds light on its implications for understanding the intricacies of identity, belonging, and cultural hybridity in contemporary literature and the broader implications of his narrative choices.

Magical realism is an exclusive literary movement that emerged from Latin American writers. Franz Roh, a German writer and art critic is pioneer of magical realism. He used this expression first time in 1925 to describe his painting in his book *Nach Expressionismus: Magischer Realismus* (After Expressionism: Magical Realism). Angel Flores said, "Magical Realism is an amalgamation of realism and fantasy" (Hognestad, n.d). Gabriel Garcia Marquez is a significant and prominent name in the field of magical realism. His debut novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is an admirable example of magical realism. Other major examples of magical realist work include *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende, *Her Body and Other Parties* by Carmen Maria Machado and *Bone Gap* by Laura Ruby.

The literary genre known as Magical Realism combines magical or mythical themes with realistic components to create realistic settings and events. It expresses a sense of mystery and surprise by subsequently depicting the everyday environment while incorporating magical or fantastical elements into it. The association between the natural and supernatural worlds, social difficulties, and cultural affiliation are all topics that are commonly explored in this genre. Writers of this genre narrate realism with magic, present extraordinary events as commonplace ones, interrogating the reader's understanding of reality and the distinctions between the miraculous and the mundane.

In the history and body of English-language Pakistani writings, Nadeem Aslam is a renowned figure. Aslam was born in Gujranwala, Pakistan on June 11, 1966. With his family he settled in Britain to escape the dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq. He was only thirteen years old when he wrote a short story and that story was published in a Pakistani Urdu newspaper. He studied Biochemistry at the University of Manchester but didn't complete the degree as he wanted to become a writer.

As a Muslim who immigrated himself, Aslam has concentrated on the experiences and characteristics of immigrant and Muslim communities. Re-creating Islam, religious rigidity, prejudice against some religions, illegal relationships, cultural hegemony, generational divides, and other concerns are just a few of the realistic images of post-independence Pakistan that Aslam has painted in his writings.

Maps is really a fascinating and compelling novel. Shamas is the raconteur of the novel who is elder brother of Jugnu. This appealing and alluring novel centers on the story of the two lovers and their family members who are concerned about the disappearance of lovers Jugnu and Chanda. The other major characters are also struggling with their own desire and society, like a Sikh girl who is forbidden to meet her lover because he is a Muslim; and the character of Suraya who is mistakenly divorced by her husband and tries to remarry him again by the Islamic law of Halala. Other characters are the younger son of Kaukab who is interested in art studies but his mother wants him to study medicine; and her daughter who doesn't want to marry a Muslim Pakistani. After her marriage, she comes to Pakistan and keeps a short haircut and wears short dresses that seem awkward in Pakistani culture.

This novel discusses arguments between European and Islamic norms; moreover, cultural clashes and issues of immigrants at a place called Dasht-e-Tanhai (place of solitude) with some superstitious beliefs and supernatural events. The novel revolves around other characters' love affairs and their struggle to balance their Eastern culture with European norms. People are unable to understand the astonished vanishing of the lovers and make assumptions about their disappearance suggesting that they turned into peacocks because many people saw a pair of peacocks in their house after the lovers' disappearance. Other believes that they become ghosts and their spirits wander near the lake side.

The novel Maps for Lost Lovers assists the interplay of myth, fantasy and reality and offers a deeper sense of magical realism. Myths are the traditional stories, legends and popular beliefs that are shifts from generation to generation. Myths involve supernatural beings and historical events and are a part of human tradition and culture for centuries. They are originated from ancient cultures, their civilizations and their stories and beliefs. People used myths to teach moral lessons and explain natural phenomena. These myths reflect values, perspectives and unique experiences of each culture.

Fantasy refers to the happenings or events that cannot happen in real life and it also includes the presence of fairies and ghosts with well-aimed imagery. It is a genre of speculative fiction that involves supernatural elements, imaginary world, metaphors and symbols. One of the key components of fantastic literature, it transports readers into an imaginative and new world. This literature is imbued with supernatural beings and happenings. Myths and fantasy are not fully based on facts, proofs and truths while Reality is something that happens in real, physical, actual and everyday life and can be witnessed. It is the totality of things, structures, phenomena and any event that happen in the present and past. Aslam skillfully incorporate these elements of magical realism into his novel to convey deeper meanings and compassionate understanding of the novel.

❖ **Research Objectives**

The research objectives include examining how magical realism portrays nature and the environment in selected literary work, exploring the reflection of characters' inner worlds and broader thematic concerns. Additionally, the study aims to investigate the cultural and social contributions depicted through magical realism, deepening understanding of identity, belonging, and societal issues and creating a timeless effect. It also seeks to probe into characters' experiences and interpretations of fantastical events, examining their psychological dimensions and collective identities. Furthermore, the research aims to examine how Aslam utilize myths, poetry, and fantastical events to address societal issues of love and loss. Finally, it aims to scrutinize the symbolic significance of mythological and poetic elements in selected work for the creation of magical world.

Review of the Literature

Aslam is renowned for his convoluted and elaborate storytelling, which frequently tackles issues related to society, politics, religion, culture and identity. Versatile artist Tishani Doshi describes Aslam as someone who "writes with great intimacy about [...] loves and losses, always drawing us to a larger picture of history, intolerance and power" (Doshi, 2017). Aslam invites readers to reveal the interconnectedness of personal experiences with broader societal dynamics. In an interview with Maya Jaggi (editor and journalist) Aslam mentions, "I've more or less realized my writing has cost me almost everything [...] Sometimes friendship, love – because there's not enough time to be with people, and never enough money" (Jaggi, 2013). Aslam acknowledges that his commitment to writing has led to significant

personal sacrifices. C.S Bhagaya said about Aslam's writings, "Aslam's novels are penned in a lush, poetic prose that has attracted the praise of critics for its vivid imagery and evocative tenor, while also raising questions about the twinning of beauty and terror".

Rafia Zakaria, an American-Pakistani writer and journalist who is renowned for writing columns in Dawn. She frequently writes in the magazines like The Guardian and The Nation. In an interview to Zakaria, Aslam said "I read what I wanted, and I wrote what I wanted [...] I firmly believe the job of a writer is to be a voice that is not the majority voice [...] I will write the way I want to write". Aslam's voice is distinctive because of its complexity and depth, as well as his capacity to approach difficult sociopolitical subjects with sincerity and empathy.

The novel is set in Dasht-e-Tanhai, a place in the North of England named by the Pakistani immigrants who live there. They set this name because this place is a place of loneliness, a place of sufferings, a place of nostalgia (past memories of homeland). The novel scrutinizes the impression of subalternity, where marginalized voices that are often silenced or ignored find expression. Kaukab is unable to speak fluent English. She marginalized herself from others and makes herself an alien. "She perceives the English language as alien and difficult for expressing her point of view and feelings. Although Kaukab knew that her family took refuge in a western country for the betterment of their personal and social life" (Ahsan & Raza, 2021). As discussed in a research journal, the novel conducts comparative analysis of existentialism. It's a perspective centered on individual's existence, investigates the issues like "Why do I exist?" and "What am I doing?" (Nawaz & Hassan, 2018). Characters in Maps are depicting arguing about faith in God and the nature of God. The background history of the story reveals that they were actually mentally disturbed by their migration. They were not living a blissful life because of limitations on their religion. (Nawaz & Hassan, 2018). Nawaz explored the existential components in Aslam's book Maps for Lost Lovers that humans have free will and they are allowed to do anything by their will.

The novel reconnoiters the experiences of Muslims living in diaspora, concentrating on how they negotiate their identities in dissimilar cultural contexts (Hossain). Muslims in diaspora face the challenge of balancing their religious and cultural distinctiveness. "Pakistani immigrants fail to reconstruct their identity because, although they have the desire to improve their situation [...] that could have given

them exposure to the new culture in the form of language" (Hossain, 2020). Immigrants circumnavigate between stabilizing their faith and participating into the local culture. Discrimination, stereotyping, alienation and Islamophobia are some common challenges confronted by Muslims in diaspora. "They are guided by conflicted thought combined with forced acceptance and rejections. Their displacement to the new land is marked by adjustments and adaptations, where they strive to be the part of new law" (Ravindran, 2023).

Magical realism is a literary fiction and artistic genre. It typically blurs the distinction between the real and the imagined, by combining mystical aspects with a realistic portrayal of the world. The literary style of magical realism gained global recognition and critical praise because of Garcia Marquez's writings. According to an American Magazine, Garcia likes the principles of surrealism but not the surrealists themselves [...] and it is true that his work is based more in the anecdote than in the symbolic or random flow of events so important to the surrealists; true also that his aim is to be accessible, not obscure. (Fetters, 2014)

Magical realism is also linked to Surrealism. Both genres integrate fantastic features into their works. Jorge Luis Borges, an Argentine author, is legendary for his contributions to magic realist movement of the 20th century. "His experimentation with Surrealism influenced the generation of writers who emerged in the 1960s and popularized Magic Realism" (Shmoop, n.d). "Magical elements are articulated in the same straightforward fashion as regular occurrences, enabling the real and the exceptional to coexist in the same thought stream" (Tiwari, 2021). Isabel Allende, a Chilean-American author acknowledged for her enchanting storytelling said in an interview, "You will find elements of magic realism in literature from all over the world [...] that's because life is full of mystery. And the goal of literature is to explore those mysteries. It actually enlarges your horizons. When you allow dreams, visions, and premonitions to enter into your everyday life and your work as a writer, reality seems to expand". (Modern Literature, 2017)

Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* is a flawless illustration of magical realism. Ab Jabbar (2019) states Rushdie uses magic realism as a means for finding truth because the main focus should be in the phrase magical realism is on the word "Realism". The factors he uses to locate the truth give an aspect of magic throughout. According to The New York Times on the Web, "The transactions between the extraordinary and

the mundane that occur in so much Latin American fiction are not merely a literary technique, but also a mirror of a reality” (Kakutani, 1989).

While there exists a substantial body of scholarship on Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers*, focuses on themes such as immigration, cultural identity, and diasporic experiences. There is a noticeable research gap concerning the specific exploration of magical realism within the novel. Existing studies often touch upon the presence of magical realist elements but do not examine deeply into how these elements function within the narrative. Furthermore, while magical realism has been extensively studied in the context of Latin American literature, its application and significance in contemporary South Asian literature, particularly within the framework of Aslam’s work, remain relatively unexplored. This research aims to bridge this gap by conducting a comprehensive analysis of the interplay of myth, fantasy, and reality in *Maps for Lost Lovers*, offering new insights into the novel’s thematic richness within the context of postcolonial literature.

Methodology

This research is structured to unfold the layers of magical realism within the novel, encompassing the author’s background, literary influences, and the thematic landscape of magical realism. This qualitative approach focuses on interpreting the quality of textual elements within the novel, rather than quantifying data. The primary source for this analysis is Nadeem Aslam’s novel *Maps for Lost Lovers*, complemented by secondary sources such as newspapers, journals, and scholarly articles. The analytical and descriptive approach used in this research allows for a detailed examination of the novel and elements of magical realism within the novel. It includes how character’s influences, superstitious events and cultural heritage shape the novel’s magical realism.

Results and Discussions

Magical realist narrations are usually set in regular or daily settings, with ordinary persons living ordinary lives and allow the external environment to react directly to the characters’ inner experiences. Symbols of nature and environment are frequently used in magical realism. In this approach, the natural environment acts as an extension of the characters’ subconscious minds, mirroring their fears, desires, and conflicts in their mind.

In the beginning of the novel Aslam narrates, "Shamas stands in the open door and watches the earth, the magnet that it is, pulling snowflakes out of the sky towards itself. With their deliberate, almost-impaired pace, they fall like feathers sinking in water". This description of snowflakes being pulled towards the earth by its magnetism blends a natural phenomenon (snowfall) with a magical quality (the earth acting as a magnet). This ordinary act of snowfall becomes infused with magical significance. The imagery of snowflakes falling like feathers sinking in water creates a dreamlike or surreal atmosphere and creates a sense of calm and serene for Shamas.

The portrayal of magical elements in the novel reinforces the idea that magic is an inherent part of their everyday life. Aslam weaves a tapestry of magic through his portrayal of the river and its surroundings. "The lake-as dazzling as a mirror" (Aslam 2) suggests a mystical quality, implying that it reflects not only physical reality but also deeper truths and emotions; because mirror shows reality. It's the lake where many hearts carved the initials on the poles of xylophone jetty in English, Hindi, Urdu and Bengali (Aslam 16). This carving in multiple languages signifies the universality of love and memory. This act of inscription evokes a sense of timelessness, where the past merges with the present through shared experiences and emotions.

River has rich significance in this narrative; for the reason, it is a place where the ghosts of two lovers are said to roam (Aslam 377). Chanda and Jugnu were disappeared like two rain-drops in a river (Aslam 101). The presence of the ghosts of two lovers adds an element of mystery and longing to the narrative, blurring the lines between the living and the dead. River also serves as a vessel for hidden knowledge and esoteric truths. Lovers lingering spirits haunting the riverbanks suggest unresolved mystery of love and carries secrets whispered by the wind on the shore.

It is also the same lake where Sikhs ceremonially cast the ashes of their dead bodies in the river and the color of the river is as black as tar (Aslam 18). The color of waves is particularly blue, grey and green (Aslam 16). This changing of colors of the river, from blue to grey-green and grey-green to black as tar, evoke a sense of fluidity and transformation as well as the cyclical nature of life and death blurring the boundaries between living and dead. The river is not merely as an element of the natural world, but it is a gateway to the mystical realms that lie beyond. It's the place

where the boundaries between living and dead, reality and enchantment are fluid and permeable.

Magical realism celebrates cultural heritage and collective memory by revisiting and reimagining cultural imaginations. As in the novel, Shamas greets the season's first snow. "He stretches out an arm to receive the small light snowflakes oh his hands [...] crystals of snow transformed into a monsoon raindrop" (Aslam 281). This reflection mirrors the characters' inner nostalgic feelings. In Pakistan they enjoyed five seasons in a year; summer, winter, autumn, spring and monsoon (Aslam 3). He imagined this snowflake as a raindrop of monsoon that he used to enjoyed in Pakistan and celebrates his cultural heritage by imagining cultural imaginations. The past and present collides or converge in that unexpected way that it creates a parallel between his past and present.

Many cultures view celestial bodies as having spiritual or metaphysical significance. It was the belief of Shamas and Kaukab, when a star shoots out from sky, Allah is arranging the final important details with the angles. When Satan comes near to hear, then shooting stars are thrown at him to drive him away (Aslam 194). Celestial bodies ignite the imagination and create a connection between rational and irrational and create a realm of magical realism.

Magical realism often reconnoiters the occurrence of supernatural elements in everyday life. Chanda's mother tells her husband that she saw the grave of a pious man, the branches on the grave were green and flowery and other were dry (Aslam 171). The green branches and flowers hold symbolic spiritual significance, representing the presence of supernatural forces that continue to influence the living world. She said if Chanda had a grave then she would plant tulips (lalah) around her grave because it has exactly the same spellings as in the name of Allah (Aslam 173). It suggests that death is not an end but a transformation into something new. It is seen as a ritualistic and as a means of communication with super power and a connection between living and dead. That is the reason Chanda's mother want to adorn Chanda's grave with flowers.

Aslam weaves the presence of ghosts into his narrative. The most prominent ghostly presence in the novel is that of Jugnu and Chanda. As in the novel children were saying all around, there's a pair of sad ghosts in the dense trees at the other side of lake. The hands of the male ghost and the stomach of female ghost are luminous

than their whole body as these figures stepped down from a cinema screen (Aslam 189). People believe, these ghosts are of Chanda and Jugnu and said, Jugnu was a lepidopterist for that cause his hands were glowing and the Chanda's stomach was luminous because it contains their child that dies with them (Aslam 233).

Aslam's novel excessively involves the superstitious beliefs, events and happenings. One of the striking incidents in the novel, a cleric telling other that his daughter is possessed by djinns and is behaving poorly (Aslam 107). The girl's mother claims, the bad spirits are controlling her daughter causing her to rebel and refuse to accept her husband (Aslam 170). Kaukab's neighbor tells her about djinns, saying, "Once they've entered a house they are hard to get rid of" (Aslam 263). Someone leaves a pig's head outside the Kiran's home (Shamas and Kaukab's neighbor) with snow crystals soaked in blood against the apple tree. People cut down the tree because a cleric claimed it was the seat of 360 djinns responsible for the widow's bewilderment in the area (Aslam 15). These experiences shape the collective beliefs and psychological dimensions of the characters, and predisposing them to accept the existence of supernatural entities. Such events create an atmosphere of fear in the novel, turning the earthly realm into a haunted one.

In Maps, the integration of myths, legends, and folklore from the characters' cultural backgrounds enhances the narrative and adds depth and complexity to the novel. Shamas asks Suraya "Do you know the story of Hiranman the rose-ring parakeet and princess Padmavati?" (Aslam 167). She was the daughter of Rajah Gandhrap Sen (Aslam 168). She had a close bond with her parakeet. Hiranman possessed keen intelligence. He helped his mistress when he was in a spell because he loved her passionately. Shamas wants to tell Suraya through this myth, "Hiranman the parakeet represents an artist, they who tell us what we should aim for [...] telling us what's truly worth living for, and dying for, in life" (Aslam 168).

Kaukab's daughter-in-law Stella tells her that her middle name "Iris" comes from the name of a beautiful girl of Greek and Roman myths that had shimmery wings and is also depicted in the ancient paintings. Aslam mentions the tale from Hindu mythology, where Shiva found Parvati by following her footsteps when she moved away from him after a quarrel (Aslam 269). He also mentions that the month of January is associated with Janus, the two-headed God, one who looks for the future while the other looks to the past.

Aslam signifies the song of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan in the novel, “Don’t anybody call me Heer [...] call me Ranjha, for I have spoken his name so many times during this separation that I am become him” (Aslam 193). This folklore revolves around a beautiful woman and a young talented man, Heer and Ranjha. Heer and Ranjha fall deeply in love with each other. The tragic climax of the story occurs when Heer is forcibly married off to another man by her family.

Societal obstacles come in their way that hinders their love. Just like in the novel, Shamas mentions the lines of Munir Niazi to show the societal obstacles that come in the way of Jugnu and Chanda’s love, “Kuj Sheher de loke vi zalim san Kuj mainon maran da shauk vi si” (Aslam 281). Kiran (his neighbor) nods; the second verse should be, “Kuj mainon jeen da shauk vi si. They did not have a death wish. They had a life wish” (Aslam 282). Heer is poisoned by her jealous husband. Overcome with grief, Ranjha embraces her lifeless body, and in a final act of devotion, he too dies beside her. People claim that they saw the spirits of Heer and Ranjha ascending together just like in the novel people see the spirits of Chanda and Jugnu together after their death.

As the mortal bodies fade away, the spirits of the beloveds (Jugnu and Chanda) are drawn together by an invisible thread of love that spans across time and space like Heer and Ranjah. In that ethereal realm, the boundaries between life and death are blurred. They find themselves reunited in that realm after their death and the extraordinary becomes intertwined with the ordinary.

Aslam draws parallels between the intimate journey of Jugnu and Chanda and the legend love story of Sassi Punnu. Sassi dies in the desert by following the footsteps of her beloved’s camel in the desert and Chanda also dies by following her beloved (Aslam 191). The birth horoscope of Sassi predicted that she would bring disgrace to her family, and in the novel, Chanda also bring disgrace to her family’s honor. Her father is no longer the headman at the mosque because people talk in the mosque that his daughter is immoral, deviant and despicable (Aslam 15).

Through the evocative language and rich symbolism, Aslam reconnoiters the depths of human emotion and experience in a world where anything is possible. The intermingling of fantasy and reality is seeming obvious in the novel as it gives insights into character’s desires and fears. As a form of escapism, it provides entertainment and temporary relief from mundane concerns. Culturally, fantasy

reflects and shapes beliefs and traditions, while in literature and art; it enriches storytelling and visual expression. Overall, this interplay enriches the understanding of the human condition, inspiring personal growth and transformation through its imaginative possibilities.

Conclusion

This analysis has proven that Aslam's novels' depiction of nature and the environment goes beyond basic backdrop. It acts as a complex and intricate tapestry that reflects individuals' inner landscapes and a source of solace while also emphasizing bigger thematic currents through the imagery of rivers, snow and other celestial bodies. It magnificently illustrates the complexities of human experience and provides subtle insights into the intricacies of cultural and social relations by juxtaposing the past and present and the magical and mundane. Fantasy elements in *Maps for Lost Lovers* are employed not merely for escapism but as a lens to critique societal norms and injustices, such as the constraints placed on individual freedom and the impact of cultural and religious expectations.

The mythological and fantastical elements in the novel are used to reflect and amplify the exploration of real-world issues such as identity, belonging, and cultural conflict. Myth and fantasy are used symbolically to explore themes of displacement love and loss. And overall this seamless blending of myth, fantasy, and reality in the novel creates a rich, multi-layered narrative that reflects the complexity of the characters' lives and their emotional landscapes. Additionally, it delves deep into the captivating crossroads where reality meets imagination, tradition dances with modernity, and individual identities intertwine with collective personalities.

Furthermore, this analysis has illuminated the transformative potential of magical realism in addressing universal themes such as love, loss and despair, and also tackles societal challenges faced by lovers. Aslam's adept use of myths, legends, and poetry not only enhances the narrative texture but also draws parallels into the narrative through the classic tale of love and tragedy of Heer Ranjha and Sassi Punnu. Each element increases the awareness about the human condition and the multifaceted nature of the culture, society and superstitions depicted in the novel. This research provides interdisciplinary approach that integrates literary analysis with cultural studies, allowing for a nuanced exploration of magical realism in *Maps*. This study also provides a detailed examination of the interplay between myth,

fantasy, and reality, which contributes to a deeper understanding of how these elements influence character development and thematic expression in contemporary South Asian literature. And in last this research extends existing theories by applying comparative cultural studies with literary analysis to reveal new dimensions of magical realism that had not been fully explored in previous studies. This contributes original insights to the field of English literature.

This research leaves with intellectually challenging questions like how magical realism varies across different cultural contexts and literary traditions and how magical realism represents marginalized and suppressed British Pakistani communities. How contemporary authors incorporate elements of magical realism to address pressing social and political issues and can magical realism serve as a tool for cultural preservation and reclamation in the contemporary era? These types of cognitive and proactive questions encourage further exploration in this literary field, and researchers can able to reconnoiter more about the charismatic tapestry of contemporary fiction magical realism.

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Correspondence:

Hiba Zaheer

engliterature2023@gmail.com
